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ABSTRACT

Politicians, parents, and teachers are decrying the "character" crisis in U.S. schools. Violence is on the rise, dropout rates are increasing, and test scores are falling. People are looking for ways of enhancing values in school reform. What is missing in this quest for reform is the acknowledgment of the fact that key agents of education (home, community, and places of worship) are rapidly changing and education is not keeping pace with these changes. Today's busy parents often lack the time and opportunities to build and maintain positive character traits in their children. As a result, most children enter elementary school with some character skill deficits. These deficits manifest themselves in the form of violent behaviors, low frustration tolerance, poor task orientation, poor impulse control, limited peer skills, and other delinquent behaviors. Classroom teachers spend valuable instructional time reacting to these behaviors in playgrounds, hallways, and classrooms. In 1995, Southern Connecticut University funded Homework Etc., a pilot partnership character education program aimed at building and maintaining positive character traits in children during the elementary school years. This program formed a partnership among teachers, parents, community businesses, and a primary school in New Haven, Connecticut. These partners were trained to identify, teach, and reinforce positive character traits in kindergarten through third grade. Analysis of pre- and post- group instruction data on specific character skills (listening, respect, responsibility, and cooperation) indicated that children who systematically received planned group instructions on these skills showed remarkable improvement on basic character skill application across school settings. Contains 9 figures and 15 references. (Author/BT)

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PAPER TITLE

Homework Etc : A Character Development
Education Partnership

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The 7th Annual National Conference on Creating the Quality School
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ABSTRACT

Politicians, parents and teachers are decrying the Character crisis in American schools. Violence is on the rise, dropout rates are increasing, and test scores are falling. They are looking for ways of enhancing values in school reform. What is missing in this quest for reform is the acknowledgment of the fact that key agents of education (home, community and worship places) are rapidly changing and the school is not keeping pace with these changes.

Most children come to school from single-parent homes and dual-income families where parents work outside the home. These busy parents often lack the time and opportunities to build and maintain positive Character skills in their children. As a result, most children enter elementary school with some Character skill deficits. These deficits manifest themselves in the form of violent behaviors, low frustration tolerance, poor task orientation, poor impulse control, limited peer skills, and other delinquent behaviors. Classroom teachers spend valuable instructional time reacting to these behaviors in playgrounds, hallways and classrooms.

In 1995, Southern Connecticut State University funded Homework Etc.- a pilot partnership Character education program aimed at building and maintaining positive Character traits in children during the elementary school years. This program formed partnership between teachers, parents, community businesses and a primary school in New Haven, Connecticut. These partners were trained to identify, teach and reinforce positive Character traits in kindergarten through third grade. Analysis of pre and post group instruction data on specific Character skills (listening, respect, responsibility, and cooperation) indicates that children who received systematically planned group instructions on these skills showed remarkable improvement on basic Character skill application across school settings.

Traditionally, calls for school reform have focused on academic achievements, better teacher education and other remedial expert-fixing interventions (Lickona 1991, Vincent 1995). It is only in recent years that some parents and teachers recognized character development and character education as major components of school reform. Surging interest in school reform is in a large part a reaction to declining educational standards, escalating violence, and self destructive behaviors involving drugs and alcohol among school children. While it is true that the school is a microcosm of the society, changes in the society are affecting the school in no little measure. The school as we know it is not changing at the same pace at which other agents of education (the church, mosque or synagogue, the home or family, and the community) are changing. Most dual-income parents work outside the home, more children than ever are growing up in poverty, one-parent family is becoming a norm, and more infants and toddlers are under the care of poorly paid day-care staff. Most children are left alone at home with televisions baby-sitting them.

These are the same children who will come to our elementary schools at the age of five or six years. Upon entry to school, new demands are placed on them by adult teachers. They are abruptly required to sit quietly in small groups, interact cooperatively with peers, respect adult rules and follow varieties of adult instructions at school. In most cases, such demands are not typically made by parents in the home environment on such a consistent basis (McGrimmis & Goldstein 1984). These skills demanded by adult teachers are sometimes foreign to these children. Chan & Rueda (1979) described them as the "hidden curriculum" operating in schools. These hidden curricula (expectations) are based on the assumption that all children enter school with similar experiences and basic character skills from home necessary to help them perform well at school. Based on these assumptions, adult teachers demand children "to behave" rather than teach them how to behave. These same teachers seldom demand children to read or write in place of teaching them skills necessary for reading or writing (Morse 1982, McGinnis & Goldstein 1984, Nwachuku 1996).

When children fail to meet these faulty expectations, frustrated teachers and school administrators find themselves spending valuable instructional time dealing with conflicts, off-task misbehaviors and other discipline problems at school. Perhaps, these factors are motivating teachers and school administrators to seek reactive after-the-fact educational interventions in the name of school reform. These interventions instituted as part of school reform are concentrated on decreasing inappropriate behaviors rather than preventing them through teaching basic Character competencies.

A proactive school reform program must involve all key agents of education (school, home, places of worship and the entire community). Such a program must include systematic teaching of life competencies during the formative years of the child before the onset of problem behaviors (Conyne 1989, Goleman 1995). In his groundbreaking book captioned *Emotional Intelligence* , Goleman (1995) reviewed the benefits of early character education and their implications to learning during the early years of a child's life. Although he used the label *Emotional literacy*, this review points to the fact that character forms the essential foundation for all learning. Brazelton (1992) emphasized that a child's readiness for school depends on the basic knowledge of how to learn. This ability (readiness) is grounded on character. Unlike intelligent quotient and personality which some argue cannot be significantly changed by education or experience (Jensen 1969), basic character competencies can indeed be learned and/or improved upon by children if we care enough to teach them. This means that the elementary and secondary school years of the child provide a critical window of opportunity for teaching basic character skills (Goleman 1995).

Character and Personality

One of the reasons why character development and Character Education was ignored by educators is the intentional swap of the term Character with Personality in most psychology and education literature. One may argue that this benign replacement of terms fooled educators and others in similar helping professions to believe that Character is synonymous with Personality. Furthermore, since Personality sounds more "scientific" it eventually displaced the term Character or projected it as the outer facade of

Personality. In reality, the reverse is the case. Personality is the outer part that manifests differently in different social situations.

Brody & Siegel (1992) traced the disappearance of Character and the use of Personality to 1933 Oxford English Dictionary. This early dictionary referred to Character seventy four times from the fourteenth Century through the nineteenth Century and Personality only thirty two times with about two thirds of the use of Personality occurring in the nineteenth Century alone. They argued that Personality is a much younger concept than Character. Generally, Personality is that aspect of a person that transpires in social settings and is open to view. From its' Latin root- Persona (Mask) it is the outer facade that may or may not impress the observer. On the other hand, Character refers to the internal quality of a person which fuels her/his drives, wishes, emotions, thoughts and actions. Unfortunately even the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM IV) which school psychologists, counselors and other pupil-personnel services constantly use, made no reference to Character. Since Character impacts more profound and lasting meaning than does Personality which is more apt to produce ephemeral effects, more attention should be paid to Character development and education. Character Education should make up a bulk of the preventive developmental counseling and teaching curriculum during the early school years of the child.

Character and Education

Early American public school curriculum has a major focus on Character Education, although it was called Moral Education in most curriculum materials dating back to 1848 (Vincent 1995). Linkona (1991) reviewed the history of Character Education in public schools. This review points to some troubling trends dating back to the early 1960's. Despite this terrible decline in Character Education, there are some renewed interests among parents and teachers in various parts of the country on education for Character.

Huffman (1994) presented some model Character Education programs and cited some critical lessons learned from implementing them. These programs are typical samples presented at the National Character Education Conference at St. Louis, Missouri,

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in July, 1996 where this author presented a position paper on Character Education. Most of these program share some common characteristics which include:

1) Indirect teaching of Character skills through literature biographies, posters, motivational speakers, and conferences.

2) Calls for collaboration between parents and teachers on educating for Character.

3) The need to begin Character Education at the early elementary school years.

4) The fact that all human share some basic core Character traits which all children must learn during the early years of development.

5) The urgent need for schools to participate in Character Education due to changes in today's families and communities.

However, these programs also share some basic shortcomings which include:

1) Lack of direct systematic instruction on Character skills.

2) Little or no involvement of pupil-personnel services staff (Guidance Counselors, Social Workers, or School Psychologists) in Character Education.

3) Lack of concrete partnership models that involves all partners in the development and implementation of the Character Education program.

What follows is a model Character Development Education Partnership Program-Homework Etc. its process and products.

Program Overview

Homework Etc. is a preventive Character Education program developed by partners in a New Haven, CT. local school community. The Southern Connecticut State University counseling program formed a partnership with some business members of the community, parents, and teachers of a local elementary school to help elementary school children build and maintain positive Character skills. This program centered around four basic assumptions:

1) That positive Character traits are learnable behaviors

2) These traits (behaviors) could be identified, analyzed and systematically taught to children in groups just like other academic and recreational skills.

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3) That teaching these skills at the early elementary school age will enhance children's personal and academic development and prevent maladaptive behaviors in later adolescence and adult stages of development.

4) That a structured learning group process is useful in teaching children with various skill levels together and training parents to reinforce these skills at home in the form of homework from a school based program.

Method

There are two major components of the program. A parent /community initiative, and direct instructions to children through structured learning groups. In addition to planning and implementing this school-based program, the investigators (partners) saw the need to rekindle the interest and participation of parents, teachers and members of the community in nurturing positive Character traits in children. A no-guilt parents program was organized for parents of participating children to review curriculum materials monthly during the planning and implementation phases of the program. Parents programs helped parents to learn instructional materials and practice ways of reinforcing their children through participatory homework activities which are an integral part of the program curriculum. Based on a needs analysis survey completed by parents and teachers, four specific skills were targeted for the program. These skills are Listening, Respect, Responsibility, and Cooperation. During the implementation phase of the program, community business members were invited as guest speakers to speak to various grade levels on these four basic Character traits. Although there was no formal evaluation of this part of the program, parents interviewed informally after the program year indicated that the program helped them and their children. Specifically, most parents agreed that participating in the collaborative Homework activities with their children was most helpful to them.

Direct Instructions through Structured learning groups

Seven classes of children grades kindergarten through third grade were targeted for direct instructions through structured learning groups. These classes received weekly developmental guidance lessons for one academic year. Developmental guidance lessons

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were developed by graduate student Counselors with directions from faculty including the author. The author supervised the development and delivery of these planned lessons to all seven classes. Age-appropriate videotapes (Robbins et al 1992) were selected and used as additional instructional materials for the program.

Six masters degree level counselors-in-training implemented the direct group instruction program weekly for one academic year. All counselors-in-training (facilitators) worked closely with cooperating classroom teachers. Most facilitators used the instructional group sessions as a partial fulfillment (group counseling component of practicum) of their masters degree in counseling. The instructional process involves skill modeling, role playing, performance practice and feedback. Homework activities were assigned to children and their parents each week to enhance acquisition and transfer of skills. Cooperating classroom teachers monitor and reinforce behavior performance during school hours while parents provide feedback from home during monthly parent sessions.

Evaluation

The effect of direct instruction through structured group sessions on character skills was evaluated. A simple behavior rating scale that required behavior frequency counts was used to complete the pre-intervention (PR) and the post-intervention (PT) ratings. The instrument was developed as a series of four questions on each competency (Character trait) after the McGinnis & Goldstein (1984) teacher skill checklist. Although a total of seven classes (K-3) with 203 students benefited from the direct instructions through structured groups, only four of these classes with ninety eight (98) students were evaluated before and after the program year. Facilitators randomly selected six children in each observed class and recorded the frequencies of behaviors one week before and one week after interventions. A one-group repeated comparison was done showing the pre-intervention (PR) data, post-intervention (PT) data and Performance change (PC) data.

Results and Discussion

Frequencies of pre-intervention (PR), post-intervention (PT) and performance changes (PC) were calculated on each Character trait taught. Tables 1-9 is a simple illustration of this data.

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Listening Skills Kindergarten Grades A&B N=42				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Face Speaker	234	205	29	12%
Make Eyecontact	142	86	56	39%
Posture/Seating Behavior	103	64	39	38%
Other Attending Behavior	388	196	192	49%

Figure 1

Listening Skills First Grade A N=28				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Face Speaker	184	114	70	38%
Make Eyecontact	101	72	29	29%
Posture/Seating Behavior	67	41	26	39%
Other Attending Behavior	205	159	46	22%

Figure 2

Listening Skills Third Grade A N=28				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Face Speaker	165	98	67	41%
Make Eyecontact	113	84	29	26%
Posture/Seating Behavior	128	110	18	14%
Other Attending Behavior	173	116	57	33%

Figure 3

Key
PR-Represents Pre-Intervention
PI-Represents Post-Intervention
PC-Represents Numerical Performance Change
%PC-Represents Percent of Performance Change

Respect Kindergarten Grades A&B N=42				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Respect Self	66	43	23	35%
Respect Rules	65	38	27	42%
Respect Others	29	14	15	52%
Wait For Turn	78	52	26	33%

Figure 4

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Respect First Grade A N=28				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Respect Self	49	27	22	45%
Respect Rules	66	48	18	27%
Respect Others	47	28	19	40%
Wait For Turn	102	73	29	28%

Figure 5

Respect Third Grade A N=28				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Respect Self	64	44	20	31%
Respect Rules	106	69	37	35%
Respect Others	112	87	25	22%
Wait For Turn	99	63	36	36%

Figure 6

Responsibility Kindergarten Grades A&B N=42				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Complete Classwork Assignments		Partially Completed		
Complete Homework		No Concrete Data		
Accepts Correction/Feedback				
Makes Choices & Follows Through				

Figure 7

Responsibility First Grade A N=28				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Complete Classwork/Assignments	49	32	17	35%
Complete Homework	24	18	6	25%
Accepts Correction/Feedback	63	48	15	24%
Makes Choices & Follows Through	42	31	11	26%

Figure 8

Responsibility Third Grade A N=28				
	PR	PI	PC	%PC
Complete Classwork Assignments	53	37	16	30%
Complete Homework	30	19	11	37%
Accepts Correction Feedback	58	42	16	28%
Makes Choices & Follows Through	70	54	16	23%

Figure 9

The author chose this simple descriptive format primarily for the benefit of partners (parents, teachers and community people) who are not equally sophisticated in statistics. Since this is a pilot sample of an on-going project, additional resources and time will be allocated to future detailed statistical analysis of the data.

Although factors other than direct instruction through structured group sessions on Character skills influenced the performance of subjects, a careful review of data (Figure 1-9) shows some positive performance changes. Data on the Responsibility was not completed in kindergarten classes A & B due to irregular attendance and the loss of a facilitator during the program.

Perhaps, it will be beneficial to look at the general performance changes at this early pilot stage of the study rather then drawing untimely inferences. One general impression from this result is that children can benefit from direct instructions on Character skills in addition to other practical methods of learning in naturalistic settings. These skills can be taught much earlier in elementary schools than taught during later stages of the child's development. It may be beneficial to start with basic listening skills. These listening skills are good prerequisites for other skills such as Respect and Responsibility. Amid these encouraging early results of this pilot study, it is necessary to implement this program for a longer period on a larger scale and observe the impact on both discipline and academic achievement in schools.

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